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ABSTRACT

One teacher of English as a second language found that Gertrude Moskowitz' humanistic approach to instruction brought about significant changes in her small and diverse class. The direct results she perceived included very strong ties within the group, mutual trust and interest, values changes, and expressions of sentiment. Indirect results, those that altered the teaching and learning process, included elimination of classroom boredom, better student lesson preparation and home study, student demand for communicative work, student demand for more grammar and vocabulary development, simplified assessment of assignments, no class stratification among those preparing for standardized exams and those who were not, and improved teacher sensitivity to the students' needs and interests. (MSE)

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HUMANISTIC TECHNIQUES

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Humanistic Techniques

Kata Ittzés, Kecskemét, Hungary

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I would like to start with a confession: I do not consider myself a 'humanistic teacher' whatever the term may imply. I do not believe in any one method as the only right one. My approach to language teaching is an eclectic one. I did not refuse using 'humanistic exercises' as supplementary material, something to be added to the lessons from time to time but I had been averse to the approach itself. Today I am going to talk about my conversion. I have found that the humanistic approach can work wonders with a group of pupils. Still, I would never be capable of the kind of humanistic teaching put forward by Gertrude Moskowitz. In my opinion, a teacher of English at school has to teach the language - and language teaching is the only field of education where students can talk about themselves or anything that is not straight 'subject matter'. At the same time, the teacher must broaden their horizons, co-ordinate subjects, develop skills that get forgotten about in other subjects and help them in getting more information about the world around them. Most of these things are not the English teacher's responsibility but if you teach school your main concern is the long-term student and you focus on his needs; I must risk saying that a teacher certainly does know better what the student's needs are, so 'needs' here means what the teahher perceives as the students' needs.

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Gertrude Moskowitz claims that humanistic exercises change student reaction to a foreign language class; there is higher

enrollment, students enjoy the lessons, they become highly motivated, have a desire to communicate and there is a relaxed atmosphere. Several methods have similar claims and I would not have turned to Moskowitz's book on the above claims since I had no problems concerning these issues. The needs I have spoken about include - either on the surface or hidden - an emotional thirst, the desire to belong to a group and also a desire - which, I feel, makes using humansitic techniques a very delicate matter indeed - to follow somebody, to look up at somebody, to find an ideal. Teachers are transmitting not only their knowledge of a subject but also their moral, emotional, social, even political views as well as their values. And children and adolescents are easy to manipulate. Do we want to manipulate them? We may manipulate them for the wrong reasons and with the wrong methods. Would not we rather prefer to subtly guide them to think and choose for themselves? There is a very thin line, a none too definite border between manipulation and individual choice. Clark, speaking of the 'tyranny of humanism' /manuscript, quoted by Scovel, TESOL '82/ voices his "uneasy feeling that something is not right". C. Brumfit in a review written about G. Moskowitz's book writes: "your sympathy is not requested but kidnapped and held hostage" /ELTJ, Oct.1981/. I am afraid the same can apply not only to the reader of the book but to the learner as well.

Teacher dependence and manipulation is only one of the possible dangers involved /and Moskowitz does not mention any dangers at all except for dealing with negative qualities instead of only positive ones/. These exercises create a very strong relationship and develop such a degree of trust which is not easily found elsewhere in society. The teacher has to be aware of this and provide discussion topics which open up the classroom and relate to other people. I think it is very

important that this philosophy not remain within the four walls of the classroom. I was also afraid that the mutual trust these exercises necessarily bring with them may lead to an over-familiarity on the side of the pupils which would have made my role as a teacher /marking and assessing them, etc./ difficult.

When I started using the exercises consistently with one group less than two years ago I was aware that I had to be on the lookout to avoid certain dangers but I could not foresee the results either of the project or even of a single exercise. From the very beginning I took notes on the exercises, pupil reactions and comments and I had to think very carefully about my next move. I knew only two things: what I wanted and why. My aims were to achieve group cohesion in a newly-formed group of 16-year olds and to contribute to their personal development. The reason was that I had an extremely mixed, although very small, group with whom I did not have the kind of contact I was used to in other groups. The history of the group in brief is that they started with a very enthusiastic substitute teacher whose main ambition had been to teach in a secondary school. This was her only group, she knew she had cancer and put all her energy, knowledge and love into the teaching of this group. When I took over in the second year they strongly resisted my personality and my methods. It took us the autumn term to accept one another. The group was a very strange mixture of 15 pupils then. In the second term I tried to discover their personal interests, hobbies and gave them reading material in those fields with no apparent results. Then I tried Mario Rinvolucri's letter writing technique and failed completely. In the meantime, 2 left the school and 6 of the remaining 13 chose typing as an option instead of English in Grade 3. I was left with seven pupils, who all attended

the same class of 30, all very different, who seemed to have nothing in common, whose level of English ranged from elementary to intermediate and whose approach to the language ranged from complete resistance to over-enthusiastic interest. In this situation, I turned to G. Moskowitz's book as a last resort.

Since I will be referring to the group as consisting of seven individuals, let me introduce them to you first. The slides I am showing were taken for a humanistic exercise last November. Peggy is the second daughter out of three of her widowed mother. Her elder sister is brilliant and her mother blames her for her handicapped twin sister. She was caught shoplifting at 14, and sent home from a summer camp for a similar offence at 15. In a sociometric survey conducted before the exercises she turned out not to like anyone in the group. Nobody liked her either. She was too shy to talk but her written English was not bad. Now she still has a few problems but everybody likes her and she has become a very honest and straightforward person. Gabriel has a grown up sister and is spoilt by his mother /who is, incidentally, a classroom teacher and a widow, like Peggy's mum/. He lets her do the thinking about his future. He is a favourite of his class-mates - though not of his teachers because he is rather slow. His slowness is coupled up with an unexpectedly quick humour and intelligence. He is not hard-working except in English. He wants to become a doctor but plans to go to medical school only later. First, he wants to learn more English. Ann is the elder child in an uneducated family. She is a very sensitive girl who is mainly interested in the arts and gets absolutely no backing from home. She has been alienated from her parents and started to have spells of depression two years ago. I was the first to notice it and talked to her - she told me how meaningless life was for her.

She is still very instable but in her written work reveals the depths of her soul. For a year she would not speak at all and I did not force her. Now she takes part in discussions and is opening up to an extent that her plans of becoming an art teacher do not seem to be unrealistic any longer. Leslie is the eldest of three boys from a poor, working class background. He has a sick, retired, always grumbling father who does not encourage his studies. He is the best pupil in the class, his main interest /to the point of obsession/ is the English language. He goes around with a notebook jotting down words, memorizes pages from dictionaries and grammar books. He knows about nothing that falls outside his school life, his intellectual background is very poor. He wants to get into university, out of his parents' way of life. He wants to build his own self but knows only about the brain. He seems to have no friends, interests or emotions. He is just beginning to discover ideas outside textbooks and life outside school. He has changed a lot since I first met him and has now an inner drive to change. Edina is a very outgoing, cheerful person, a favourite with boys and girls alike. She is a catastrophe academically who can feel but not think. She enjoys company, has a fear of being alone. She failed in maths; her reaction was to run away from school and the explanation she gave for the failure was that'the maths teacher has hated her'. She loves to express herself in pidgin English. English is her favourite subject and she wants to take a state exam in it, although she might not even pass the school exam. Paul is very intelligent and has a quick mind but an instable, unreliable personality. He is a boarding pupil with a rather strange upbringing; his father, a teacher, sometimes beats him up for no apparent reason other times is very permissive. He is emotionally imbalanced,

often acts before he thinks and gets himself into a lot of trouble. His attitude to English is similarly changable. He loves it when he is well prepared or gets a good mark but is easily offended. He has revealed surprising things about himself last year but occasionally still prefers to remain an outsider. Eve is an absolutely normal girl, too normal, I am afraid. She has no problems or arguments with her parents, she is an excellent pupil, always does what she has been told. She is very naive and believes evebody is as good as she is. She has no initiative, no imagination, she is convinced that hard work and determination will get her a medical degree and a happy family life. She is very active in the English class /together with Leslie and Gabriel they participated in two summer camps with British students and prepared for a state exam/ likes everything we do and has no ideas of her own to add. When I asked them to comment on humanistic techniques she wrote everything was the best as it was. Her only critical comment was on an exercise /Ego trip/ where she found it embarrassing to talk about her positive qualities: "Talking about my friends' opinion of my good qualities seems a bit conceited. Therefore it'd be better to write down good and bad qualities together. I think that it's more difficult to find out our bad qualities."

I do not know if these seven are the exception or, if you get to know your pupils it turns out that they are all such 'irregular' personalities. This was what I had, anyway, and I had to be very careful to keep a balance: not to intrude into their life, not to offend, try to break down resistance and also to give and receive. I had to be ready to accept that these adolescents who had been starved emotionally at school and, partly, at home found a time and a place to talk about

themselves to a group in the English lesson. They also very soon realized how important the others are in the group and started to take a very deep interest. I, too, started giving much more of myself, taking part in the exercises, sharing my opinion or emotions, whichever was needed.

The first period was the most difficult: after the first three exercises /I like you, Search for someone, Lots in common/ which I modified trying to avoid being too personal, my pupils began to look at me with hazy eyes as if they had been in love with me. The fourth exercise /One, two, in my shoe/, which we did for Christmas, brought about such waves of emotion that I had to conclude the class with a funny exercise to break up the sentimental mood. The real effect of the exercises started when the group considered any task that had a personal touch in it as if it were a humanistic exercise. The first surprise came when there was a letter writing task in their textbook sometime in January. /"A friend of yours is ill in hospital and must remain there for some time. You are sending him a parcel of three books to read. Write the letter in which you tell him what the books will be, and why you have chosen them."/ All the groups I had given this task before wrote a short letter in their exercise-books mentioning the titles and adding two or three commonplace sentences. Well, on the day when the assignment was due, I received seven addressed letters in envelopes; some written on beautiful stationery, one or two even with 'stamps' drawn on the envelope and, without exception, the letters were emphatic, deeply felt pieces of writing. Ann wrote to a certain Albert, here is part of her letter. "You wrote you felt bored and saw much queerness in life and people. You are in a 'cell' now, but this is a good time for watching things and people

around you and get to know more about them... I know you'd love to run now but the fracture of the leg heals slowly so don't be impatient.

I wish you a cosy bed and fast recovery.

Yours lovingly,

Ann"

The following quotations are from Eve's letter. "The doctor said you'd get well again in a short time therefore you mustn't become embittered about your illness... These books are amusing short stories ... I've chosen them because I think you can read them easily, they'll amuse you and take your mind away from other things." /The quotations reminded me of the technique I used in correcting these letters. Because I had no heart to use red ink on these writings I made corrected copies, writing down the whole letter again - but this is not a technique I would suggest if you have 30 pupils in a class./ In the following lesson there was a heated discussion on a point in their textbook: "Without good health life isn't worth living". They all agreed that the ill and the handicapped have as much right to life as the strong and the healthy and talked about ways of helping them enjoy a full life. In an exercise practising the gerund in patterns "What I like most in life is ...-ing", "I really enjoy doing things such as ...-ing" they wrote and shared with the others deeply personal sentences. The same thing happened with the "used to" pattern. Let me quote a few sentences from Edina who reflected her present values in a pattern practice. "It's no good living in the world without love and friendship." "A lot of children quarrel with their parents. There's no point in having arguments with others." "You'll never be happy if you've only got money and a job or if you're very famous. It's

no good living without love." The greatest compliment I've ever received came from Ann in a task of describing people for the others to find out who they were. They had to use the present participle and/or prepositional phrases. Ann wrote: "A person sitting facing us in the classroom and listening to us." I was deeply moved by the 'listening to us' bit because this is what our pupils rarely get at school, being listened to. I gradually became a fully-qualified member of the group. My vote was one of eight, but respected. Still, my views could be challenged, my English scrupulously corrected in the lessons by Leslie, I have often been examined /e.g. asked questions about a passage they had to read and probably remembered better than me or tested on difficult vocabulary items/. These were study situations for them and I set them up. They, obviously, had to know what they were asking but it greatly impressed them that they could 'test' their teacher.

I used altogether 15 exercises from Gertrude Moskowitz's book. I did not use more because of time constraints, because there were exercises I found too 'hot' and dangerous - sometimes I'd been nauseated even reading them - and because lots of exercises were just variants on the same theme. When I did an accounting it turned out that I avoided complete chapters and used no exercises from "Sharing Myself", "Me and My Fantasies", "The Arts and Me". It can also be revealing that most exercises were taken from the chapter "Relating to Others". One or two each came from "Discovering Myself", "My Strengths", "My Self-image", "My Feelings", "My Memories", "My Values".

I have mentioned a few of the things these exercises changed in me and my group. I would like to sum up what they have been. Directly related results have been

- very strong ties within the group

- mutual trust /this has been sensed by my other groups as well/;
- deep interest towards the others;
- personal ties, friendships;
- a change in values. It is not characteristic in this very materialistic society to consider human qualities as of prime value instead of money and career;
- 'sentimental signs' /birthday card, Christmas present, etc. - I had never thought I would treasure signs as these!/.

The indirect results, altering the whole learning-teaching process have also been very encouraging:

- interest; no boredom when someone talks in class, if not the topic then it is the person who is important;
- much better preparation for lessons, individual home study for example even when it was not asked. They wanted to get over the textbook fast in order to have time for other activities;
- a demand for communicative competence /"Why don't we spend more time talking?"/. This group has spent much more time talking than any other group before as, due to their home preparation, there is very little time spent on the textbook. Still, they would have much more to say than time /two or three lessons a week/ allowed;
- a demand for grammar and lexis. Because they feel the urge to communicate they always realize their limits and how much more they need to study. Whenever they find a weak spot they ask me for extra practice and sit through 45 minutes of grammar drills with a happy grin on their faces when they think it is the drilling of the Past Conditional which will take them nearer the goal of expressing what they want;

- the mutual trust led me to change the checking of assignments - we do not go through the whole exercise but only problems they have come across are discussed. They are probably very proud of being trusted and deserving it;
- in the final year it is customary to concentrate only on exam subjects. This has been the first year when there is no division between the ones who take an exam and those who do not. They all work as if they would take the exam, I have had no problems with preparation for lessons, noone ever copied out homework from another exercise-book.
- I have become very sensitive to their needs, interest, mood. This is the group where I never know how I'll spend my 45 minutes. Most of the time, even if I do plan a lot, we manage to do twice as much. Sometimes, however, we go on for 55 minutes, taking up the precious break as well, not having done one third of my lesson plan. If this causes problems, the pupils just do what was left out on their own because it is always in their interest if we do something else. They give me a very conscious support in teaching.

The changes due to the humanistic techniques directly or indirectly will, I hope, have a long-time affect on my and my pupils' lives. By this school year they have become a very mature group and last September we discussed their aims for the year and also what means they wanted to achieve these aims with. There were lots of things in the two lists but no 'humanistic exercises'. Eventually, we agreed that we would do one or two. In fact, we have done six of the fifteen this year. Their arguments against the exercises were that in an examination year they had to concentrate on grammatical tests, translation exercises, reading skills, fluency in exam topics and these

exercises would take up too much of their time. By now, however, it does not much matter if we do these exercises or not. We have all been imbued with the spirit and, perhaps I may say, philosophy of humanistic teaching. When I told my pupils we had done six humanistic exercises this year they began wondering which they had been. By now they cannot tell the difference between these exercises and countless others we have done in the same spirit.

*Caring and Sharing in the Foreign Language Class, by Gertrude Moskowitz, 1978. Newbury House.